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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0035
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0867
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1861
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001769

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/12/2017

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FM MITRI BELIEVES PATRIARCH COMMITTED TO
FRENCH INITIATIVE

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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SUMMARY

1. (C) Acting Foreign Minister Tareq Mitri reported that the Patriarch is committed to carrying out the French initiative and elucidated on how it would work. Mitri said the Patriarch intends to solicit names from four Maronite leaders (two March 14 and two from March 8-Aoun) and will then come up with a final list to submit to Saad Hariri and Nabih Berri. The Patriarch will submit names, regardless of whether he receives submissions from the four leaders, according to Mitri (giving a slightly different version than the French have given us); the Patriarch may also select names that were not submitted by the four Maronite leaders. Hariri and Berri will then agree on a candidate and present that name to parliament for election. Mitri predicts the list will contain five or six names, including the top three candidates (Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, and Michel Aoun), plus two non-political candidates, possibly Joseph Torbey and Shakib Qortbawi.

2. (C) Mitri reported on his recent trip to Lisbon and Rome, stating that Italian FM D'Alema is demonstrating the most practicality when it comes to the elections, while the Vatican is moving quite cautiously. End summary.

MITRI'S INTERPRETATION OF THE FRENCH INITIATIVE

3. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Acting Foreign Minister Tareq Mitri on November 13. Mitri noted that he had met the previous evening with Maronite Patriarch Sfeir the previous evening, including a lengthy dinner and than evening walk. Mitri reported that the Patriarch has come around to the French initiative to solve the presidential elections because there is "no other game in town." The French convinced the Patriarch that they have the full support of all key players, including the Arab League and the United States.

4. (C) Mitri's understanding of the initiative is that the Patriarch will send his bishops to four Maronite leaders, Samir Geagea, Amine Gemayel, Michel Aoun, and Suleiman Franjeh, for their list of names. He will then prepare a

final list of five or six names, based upon the submissions of the four Maronite leaders, and submit his list to Speaker Nabih Berri and MP Saad Hariri, who will try to select a consensus name to present to Parliament for election. The Patriarch will submit names, regardless of whether the four provide him with their choices. While French Charge Parant told us that the Patriarch would only pick names submitted by the Maronite leaders, Mitri disagreed: he said that the Patriarch does not consider himself to be bound by the names submitted by the four Maronite leaders and could pull in other names. (Note: The Ambassador met with Aoun prior to this meeting, and Aoun gave the impression that he does not plan to submit any names, Septel. End comment.)

SPECULATING ON NAMES

15. (C) Mitri assumes the list will include the top three candidates: Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, and Michel Aoun. Mitri expects that two or three candidates proposed will be independent of March 8 and March 14 groups. Mitri said that while Demianos Kattar is taking his candidacy very seriously, demonstrated by recent visits to Nabih Berri's brother and to Hizballah members, Mitri does not believe the Patriarch would support him. Mitri also dismissed any prospects for Simon Karam, Michel Edde, and Fares Boueiz.

16. (C) Asked why the Patriarch at last gave in to the proposal that he submit names after resisting this idea for months, Mitri stated his belief that the Patriarch wants the record to show that he gave it his all. He also thinks the Patriarch wants a resolution to be reached as soon as possible, noting that he has a visit to Rome scheduled for November 21, putting him out of town -- probably intentionally -- on the day that parliament is scheduled to vote. (Note: The Ambassador will see the Patriarch later today, 11/13, and will press the Patriarch not to be absent

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during this critical period. End note.)

THE THREE EUROPEAN FMS WEIGH IN

17. (C) Noting that he had joined a Euro-Med meeting in Lisbon last week, Mitri reported on recent meetings he had with Spanish FM Miguel Angel Moratinos, French FM Bernard Kouchner, and Italian FM Massimo D'Alema. Mitri said Moratinos is confident Syria is on board with allowing for the Lebanese elections to move forward, and will be attending the Annapolis conference. Moratinos deemed this a big carrot for Syria, and he assured Mitri that Syria would thus step aside and let Lebanon's presidential elections proceed. Moratinos, Mitri said, is naive, "foolish."

18. (C) For his part, Kouchner mentioned to Mitri that he would soon be in Beirut and used language that intrigued Mitri. Whereas Kouchner had earlier emphasized the need for "consensus," this time he told Mitri that there should be a president with "broad-based support." (Note: Kouchner arrived in Beirut November 12. End note.) Mitri said the same language was used by the Vatican and by EU envoy Javier Solana.

19. (C) Mitri was most impressed by the Italian FM, who he deemed the "most shrewd." D'Alema told Mitri the pressure on Syria is serious, but may not be enough to prevent Syria from intervening. D'Alema believes it is time to discuss names of presidential candidates. He advocates a president that shares March 14 principles, but one who is not necessarily from March 14, or from any political group. He emphasized that he does not mean he supports a constitutional amendment, but rather would support a president from a civil society background. Mitri deduced that the two likely candidates, those who are not foremost politicians and who come from such a background, are Joseph Torbey and Shakib Qortbawi. Mitri

added that when he visited the Patriarch the previous day, he ran into Qortbawi, who had just visited the Patriarch. The Patriarch, noting the embrace Mitri offered Qortbawi, asked of Mitri, "You like him?" and, answering his own question, said, "He's a good man."

VATICAN IN LISTENING MODE

¶10. (C) The Ambassador asked Mitri about his meetings in the Vatican last week. Noting that he met with the Holy See FM Dominique Mamberti, Mitri reported that the Vatican is moving slowly and acting elusively, listening more than it is talking. He said Mamberti emphasized the following points: 1) The Vatican does not want any linkage between the Annapolis conference and the Lebanese elections; 2) It does not want any community, especially the Shia, to feel excluded from the election process because such a sentiment would aggravate the situation further; and 3) It does not trust Syria, but believes that the French are well-positioned to try to contain the Syrians.

¶11. (C) Mitri sensed that the Vatican was not entirely on board with the French initiative. He surmised that it could be that the Vatican was uninformed, noting that the visit of Sarkozy advisor Jean-David Levitte to Damascus went unmentioned during their meeting. Mitri said the Vatican was curious about the names of candidates being floated around, but refrained from saying anything itself. Mitri listed three priorities he heard from Mamberti on the elections: 1) Some sort of consultations with Christian leaders; 2) No blank check handed to the Muslims to select the president; and 3) A preference for elections taking place at the last minute, sometime after November 21, so that all other possibilities will have been exhausted and regional events can be taken into consideration.

¶12. (C) The Pope and Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud met recently, and according to Mitri, King Abdullah told the Pope during a 20-minute discussion on Lebanon that he supports the election of a Christian president, one who is strong and will defend the Taif Accord. This, Mitri said, reassured the Vatican.

NASRALLAH SPEECH "SMELLS OF BLOOD"

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¶13. (C) Though Mitri deemed the Patriarch dismissive of Hassan Nassrallah's November 11 provocative speech, Mitri expressed concern to Bishop Samir Mazloum (close to March 8 Maronite Suleiman Franjeh), who responded, "Do not worry, Nasrallah said 'consensus' five times throughout his speech!" Mitri retorted that the speech "smells of blood" to him, but Mazloum continued to downplay the speech, saying, "This is Lebanon - people take things far here."

FELTMAN